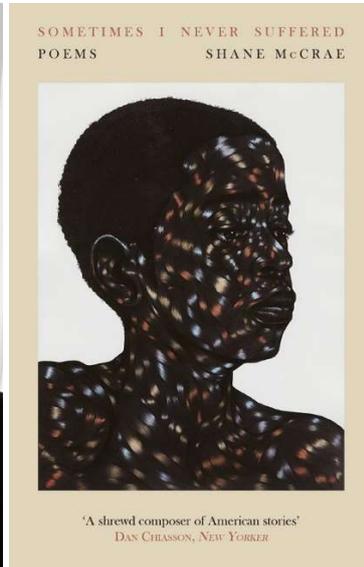


Sometimes I Never Suffered by Shane McCrae



Poet Shane McCrae grew up in Texas and California. He is the author of several poetry collections, including *Mule* (2011); *Blood* (2013); *The Animal Too Big to Kill* (2015); *In the Language of My Captor* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; and *The Gilded Auction Block* (2019). His work has also been featured in *The Best American Poetry 2010*, edited by Amy Gerstler, and his honours include a Whiting Writers' Award and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. McCrae lives in New York City and teaches at Columbia University.

Reviews

'The stunning fifth book from McCrae ... is steeped in the truths of witness and imagination. In poems that wrestle, doubt, and syntactically and rhythmically double-back on themselves, McCrae writes of such characters as the "Hastily Assembled Angel," who "was/ Not God and could be wrong." McCrae's angel ponders a line that reads "in the midst of life we are in death," while Jim Limber, a recurring character, states: "I can't die/ Enough for all the life I see." These poems see the white world as it chooses not to be seen, and illuminate the contradictions, disappointments, and loneliness that comes with paying true witness. As Limber wonders: "If I've earned my reward where is the life where I can spend it." In these pages, heaven is an "ordinary garden" that has been "set free," and each poem transcends with feeling, particularity, and honesty. This newest collection continues McCrae's powerful examination into race, forgiveness, and meaning in America, making it an essential contribution to contemporary poetry.' (description via *Publishers Weekly*)

'In *Sometimes I Never Suffered*, the title's quarrel between "sometimes" and "never" prepares one for conflict. He goes beyond recollected hardship into a vertiginously Miltonic vision. In his raggedly imperfect creation myth, a "hastily assembled angel" falls from grace, only it turns out to be more push than fall: 'Before the other angels shoved him had /

Started combining words but nobody / Would name the things he saw the way he named them / And to the other angels all his naming / Was noise they shouted as they shoved him.' Inarticulacy becomes a form of eloquence in this exploration of being cast out and an outcast. In McCrae's hands, poetry is reclamation. It is also transport: writing a way out and through. In 'Seawhere', he explains: 'The problem isn't that I don't see faces / Like mine it's that I don't see inner lives / Like mine I mean the way a person's inner / Life is expressed partly by the public spaces'. He has to "borrow an inner life" in a white-supremacist world. The gain, for his readers, is that he has chosen to make poetry the public space in which to express – and to own – his inner life.' (Kate Kellaway, *the Guardian*)

The Hastily Assembled Angel Considers the Lives of Dogs and of People

The hastily assembled angel wanders
And has wandered through centuries of cities
And countries and millenia of cities
And countries and of women and of men there's

No hurry now though he was hurriedly
Once brought to being and bears the scars of that
Though slowly in the Earth though slowly he
Eventually began to wonder what

The hurry had been for and if he could
Have been a better angel or have done
Better the job he did if once
They'd made him the other angels had allowed

Him to meet God for he has been uncertain
As people are uncertain he has never
been as certain as dogs are who sniff
The wind that moves the curtain and see behind the curtain

Jim Limber's Theodicy

What if it Heaven was like my momma said it
Would be like gardens spread like blankets spread
Wide between rivers gardens full like rivers with good
Food all kinds but also okra fried hot
And bread and chicken and even candy
All served on dishes like the dishes white
Folks got what if it Heaven was like what
We laughed about over supper sometimes and we
Were here together now in Heaven and we saw it
Together me and momma now
In Heaven on a picnic between those rivers
What if in Heaven we could have white things

And not be white how would we know
how good it was if it was good for everyone

Jim Limber On Possibility

What if I had been born in Heaven do
They do that here I've never seen a baby
But I see full-grown people who
I hear the angels whispering they say they
Were babies when they died I always look
those people in the eye but I don't think
They see me and I've never heard them speak
They just walk around in sailor hats with blank
Looks on their faces those white hats with the blue
Anchors I sometimes see them walking
With their mouths open the first one I saw
I saw like that and when I tried to talk to
Him it was like I wasn't there
So I peeked in his mouth

and in his mouth was the whole sky and stars

Discussion Ideas

- The Hastily Assembled Angel appears a sequence of twelve poems in Shane McCrae's collection – he's hastily assembled by other angels, shoved out of heaven, and then wanders through eternity. 'Dogs and People' is the last poem of the sequence. As an embodiment of uncertainty, how successful is the Hastily Assembled Angel?
- Is this a religious poem?
- Jim Limber was the mixed race ward / adopted son of nineteenth century Confederate president Jefferson Davis https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Limber The second sequence in Shane McCrae's collection is called 'Variations on Jim Limber Goes to Heaven'. What does 'theodicy' mean? How does it apply to Jim Limber's picnic in this poem?
- 'On Possibility' is the last poem in the Jim Limber sequence. What is the possibility that he sees?
- Where do you think Jim Limber's voice stops and Shane McCrae's starts?

Other books by Shane McCrae

The Gilded Auction Block (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019)

In the Language of My Captor (Wesleyan University Press, 2017)

If you liked Shane McCrae, try ...

- Danez Smith
- Terrance Hayes
- Claudia Rankine

Shane McCrae online

[Shane at poets.org](http://poets.org)